

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Luncheon in McAllen,
Texas
February 9, 2000

Thank you very much. I want to say, first of all, how very grateful I am to Jesus and Elvia for having us in their beautiful home; to Alonzo Cantu; and of course, to my good friend Congressman Hinojosa.

I thought it was interesting that he quoted that line from “Casablanca”—[laughter]—my second favorite movie of all time. I like you very much, but I must say I’ve never thought of you in the same breath as Ingrid Bergman before. [Laughter] I’ll have to think about that one.

Let me say to all of you, I—Ben talked about how I have been here now, I guess, three times since I’ve been President. It isn’t a hard sell. If it were up to me, I’d come once a month. If you’ve been following the weather between Washington and New York, where I’m spending most of my time now, you know that it’s a little better down here. I saw the first golf course without snow on it I’ve seen in 3 weeks, today coming in from the airport.

I will be brief because I want to get around and visit with all of you and then speak about what you wish to speak about, but I would like to make a couple of general points. First of all, I came to the valley and to McAllen on the last night of my campaign in 1992; some of you were there. We had a marvelous 24-hour affair. We stopped in nine different communities, and I really wanted to come here. And I said then I wanted the American people to give me a chance to put the people of this country first again over the politics of Washington, which was, I thought, entirely too divisive and too mired in the past. And we brought a new philosophy to try to bring the people together, to try to change the way Government works, to empower people to solve their own problems, to try to bring opportunity to every responsible citizen, and to make a genuine attempt to build a community of all Americans. And our country is growing increasingly diverse with every passing day. In just a decade, for example, there will be no majority race in the entire State of California, our biggest State.

So all these things are important. We talked about how we sent people from the Government

down here to try to help. I think that’s important. I think if we’re going to have one America, we can’t pretend that we’re building one if we only go to the largest places or to the wealthiest places or to the places with the most influence or even to the places where I won the electoral votes. We have to try to bring everybody into the family of America and go forward.

In 1992, when I stopped here, we had high unemployment. Today, we have the longest economic expansion in history and the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years and the lowest Hispanic- and African-American unemployment rates ever recorded.

We had a great deal of social division in terms of race and income and other ways, and a lot of social problems. Today, we have the lowest welfare rolls in 30 years, almost 7 million fewer people on welfare, 2 million-plus children lifted out of poverty, the lowest crime rates in 30 years, the lowest poverty rates in over 20 years. The college-going rate is up by about 10 percent. And we’ve put empowerment zones all across America, including one in south Texas, to try to give people a better chance to be a part of this new enterprise economy.

So the country, in general, is in the best shape perhaps it’s ever been. And the great question in this election season, which I think I can comment on because for the first time in over two decades I’m not on a ballot anywhere, is after we have done all this work to turn our country around, to get it moving in the right direction, what are we going to do with this opportunity?

And all of you can remember times in your own life—at least all of you that are over 30—when you made a mistake because you thought things were going so well there were no consequences to breaking your concentration, to not thinking ahead, to putting off the tough decisions that you knew were out there. That’s the great challenge to America today: How are we going to make the most of what is truly a magic moment in our Nation’s history?

And as I argued a little more than a week ago in the State of the Union Address, I think the only thing to do is to keep pushing ahead, to bear down, to keep changing along the lines

that have brought us this far, to ask ourselves what are the big challenges still out there, and do our best to meet them. And I just want to emphasize, if I might very briefly, six of those that I think have particular impact on the people of the Rio Grande Valley.

First of all, the number of people over 65 will double in the next 30 years, and we have to be prepared for that. That means we have to save Social Security; we have to strengthen Medicare; and we ought to add a prescription drug benefit that our seniors can buy at a price they can afford, because over 60 percent of the seniors in America today cannot afford the prescription drugs they need to lengthen and improve the quality of their lives.

Secondly, we have to realize that only in one respect has our social fabric been more strained since 1993: There are more people without health insurance today than there were in 1993. I remember when all the interest groups were arrayed against me and the First Lady when we tried to provide health care coverage for all. They told all those Congressmen that if they voted for my health care plan, the number of uninsured people would go up. Well, every Congressman who voted for it can say "That's right. I voted for Clinton's plan. It didn't pass, and the number of uninsured people went up."

So I'm trying to do something about that. In 1997 we passed the Children's Health Insurance Program. And we got it off the ground, and it was a little slow starting. But last year we doubled the number of people in CHIP, and there are now 2 million children who have health insurance. But there are 3 million more who are eligible, and what I want you to understand—a lot of them are in the Rio Grande Valley—and the thing I want to emphasize is, we appropriated the money. The money is there, and we have to get these children enrolled.

And I also asked the Congress this year to cover the parents of these children, almost all of them working people but on very limited incomes. Cover them. If we covered the parents and children that are income-eligible for the health insurance program for children, we could literally cover 25 percent of all the uninsured people in the United States, and they're the 25 percent that need the coverage the worst. So I ask you to help me pass that.

In addition to that—and I'll bet there are a lot of these people in the valley, as well—the fastest growing group of people without

health insurance are people between the ages of 55 and 65 who take early retirement or change jobs, and their new job doesn't have health insurance for people their age, or they take early retirement, and they don't have any health insurance until they're old enough to get on Medicare.

I have proposed to let them buy into Medicare and to give them a tax credit to make it affordable. This will not in any way weaken Medicare. If anything, it will strengthen Medicare, because we're not taking money out of the Medicare Trust Fund. But if you think about the hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people out there today who are, because they're in an age group that I'm rapidly approaching, are not exactly attractive for insurance but are, on average, healthier than people over 65, we need to provide some way for them to get health care and for the health care providers to be reimbursed if they give them health care. And the simplest, easiest thing is to let them buy into the Medicare program.

Let me say a word about education. In the country as a whole, test scores are up; high school graduation rates are up; college-going rates are up. That's the good news. The bad news is there is still a differential in the high school dropout rate that is breathtaking between Hispanic-Americans and the rest of America. And the dropout rate from college, once people go, is very high.

So I have proposed a budget that puts a billion dollars more into Head Start, the biggest increase in a generation; that would provide after-school programs and summer school programs in every troubled school in America where there's a high dropout rate, and we know that makes a big difference. And we passed in '97 the HOPE scholarship, which gives a \$1,500 tax credit for people for the first 2 years of college, and further tax relief for later years, which has effectively opened the doors of college to all Americans, at least to community college.

I have asked the Congress to add to that a tax deduction for up to \$10,000 of college tuition and to make it at the 28 percent rate, even for people in the 15 percent income tax bracket. That would effectively open the doors of 4 years of college to every person in this country. It could change the future of the Rio Grande Valley. And I hope you will help me pass that in this coming session.

I also have made proposals that would enable us to have the funds to help prepare 5,000 schools every year and to do major repairs or build 6,000 more schools. We have a lot of kids that are in overcrowded classrooms, a lot of kids that are in classrooms so broken down they can't even be wired for the Internet. So I hope you will support the education agenda.

In the area of families, I believe that one of the biggest unresolved problems we have today, or just daily challenges, is the challenge that families face when they have to work, particularly when both parents work or when there's a single-parent household and they have children, school-aged children, or even preschool children. So I recommended an expansion in the child care tax credit. I recommended making it refundable for low income people who sometimes spend as much as 25 percent of their income on child care. I recommended a \$3,000 tax credit—that's \$3,000 off your tax bill—to pay for the long-term care costs of people who are caring for elderly or disabled relatives. I think that is a very important thing, and I hope the Congress will finally agree to go on and raise the minimum wage.

The last point I want to make on families and health care is what I made today—we have finally gotten a conference to begin tomorrow on the Patients' Bill of Rights, which I think is very important, to guarantee people the right to see a specialist, the right not to lose their health care coverage or to be required to change doctors in the middle of a treatment, a pregnancy or a cancer treatment, for example. And I think it's important that we pass that.

The last economic point I want to make is that we now have an opportunity that we didn't have in '92, and that is to focus even more sharply on the people and the communities who are still mired in poverty and a high unemployment rate, the people who have not fully participated in this economic recovery.

Now, the empowerment zone program, which is very well-known in south Texas because of the leadership of the Vice President—we've had our big national empowerment zone conference down here in the valley not very long ago last year. But I think it's time to both increase the number of these zones and increase the financial incentives to invest in them. I know you want to get high-tech business in here.

You know, if there is some extra risk or some extra cost by going further away, we ought to

help to defray that, because we will never have a better opportunity—ever—to prove what I believe: that we can bring free enterprise to people and places that have been left behind and that this is a way not only to help the people in those categories, the high unemployment areas in south Texas, this is a way to keep the American economic expansion going with no inflation because we'll be adding new businesses, new workers, new taxpayers, and new consumers all at the same time.

I'm also, as I'm sure you've noticed from the emphasis I've given it for the last year or so, trying to get Congress to pass sweeping legislation that would cover every area of high unemployment in the country, to give people the same incentives to invest to bring new businesses to these areas we now give people to invest to bring new businesses to South America or Asia or Africa. I'm not against helping poor countries overseas. I just think we ought to have the same incentives to invest in poor areas here at home in America. I hope you'll help me pass that new markets legislation.

One big part of that that I'm going to emphasize in a couple of months is closing the so-called digital divide, which would really be helped if you were able to recruit some high-tech companies down here and train people to work in them. Because one thing we know is that when people have access to computers, not just children in the schools but their parents at home or in a community center—and I've proposed establishing 1,000 of them across America to give all adults access to the Internet—we know that innovative people find new ways to improve their lot in life.

For example, probably some of you here have bought or sold something on the website eBay, which is a great trading center. There are now over 20,000 Americans, many of whom were once on welfare, who are now actually making a living—it's their full-time job—trading on eBay. No one would have ever thought of this as a possible opportunity for poor people, as a way to create small businesses.

I've established all these community development financial institutions around the country since I've been President. We're making a lot of microcredit loans. Think about that. Think about being able to loan somebody enough money just to buy a computer with good capacity. They could be fully connected to the Internet, and they figure out how to make their own

living. There are all kinds of options out there, and we ought to leave no stone unturned in trying to get at the heart of this poverty problem and empower every person who has not yet been a part of this prosperity to do well.

Now, here's the last point I want to make. If you were to ask me to put in a sentence what has been behind the change I tried to bring to America the last 7 years, what is behind the philosophy that governs everything I do, it is my belief that everyone counts and everyone ought to have a chance, and we all do better when we help each other, that we really have to build one America, and that the Government isn't the source or the solution to all the problems but is an absolutely imperative partner. We have to create conditions and empower people to make the most of their own lives.

And in that connection, I have to tell you that one of the things that continues to bother me in my efforts to build one America is the problem that I continue to have in the United States Senate in getting judges confirmed—you want to talk to me about judges—particularly judges who come from diverse backgrounds. And there's always a political element in the appointment of judges, and sometimes when the President is of one party and the Senate is of another party, they don't confirm as many of the President's appointees. But there has never been an example like what we've seen of the deliberate slow walk and refusal to have hearings, refusal to vote up or down on judges.

I appointed an El Paso lawyer named Enrique Moreno to serve on the Fifth Circuit. He graduated from Harvard and Harvard Law School. He'd come a long way from El Paso. The American Bar Association said he was well-qualified to be a judge. I had the highest percentage of judges recommended well-qualified by the

ABA of any President since they've been doing the ratings, even though I've appointed more Hispanic, more African-Americans, more female, and a more diverse judiciary in history. And everybody concedes they're less political than my two predecessors. They just show up for work, by and large, and do their job. And I cannot even get a hearing because your Senators won't support it.

I have appointed—I nominated a judge named Julio Fuentes for the Third Circuit and Richard Paez in California. They're supposed to give me a vote on him in March, but that's another thing I wish you would communicate, particularly if you're not a lawyer. You could have more influence in a way if you're not a lawyer. Tell your Senators that when the President appoints a person who worked himself all the way through Harvard Law School out of El Paso, and the ABA says he's well-qualified, and Texas needs the judge, give the man a hearing, and give him a vote. And if they're not for him, have the courage to vote against him. Don't keep killing these things.

I keep telling people in Washington, "We can do our business. We can show up for work. We can make progress, and we can still have elections. There will still be things we honestly disagree about. But we owe it to the American people, without regard to our party or our philosophy, to believe that everybody counts, everybody ought to have a chance, and we'll all do better when we help each other."

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:05 p.m. at a private residence. In his remarks, he referred to Jesus and Elvia Saenz, luncheon hosts; and Alonzo Cantu, member, board of directors, Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute.

Remarks at a Luncheon for Representative Rubén Hinojosa in McAllen *February 9, 2000*

Thank you so much. Well, Congressman, I'm afraid now that this meeting has been opened to the press, if the list you just read is widely published, every other Member of Congress will be angry at me for not doing as well. *[Laughter]* I want to say a special thanks to your Congress-

man Ruben Hinojosa and Marty, and a happy birthday to his little daughter, Karen. He has really done a wonderful job for you. And he makes it easy to be helpful.

I want to thank Zeke and Livia Reyna for their cohosting this event. And I want to thank